



Wildland Fire – Critical Incident Stress Management Program

Death of a Co-Worker by Suicide

Suicide is a tragic and shattering reality which not only brings a life to an untimely end but also has far reaching effects on family, friends, colleagues and communities. The workplace is one such community where people can spend up to half their waking hours, with many forming important relationships, bonds, and camaraderie with their colleagues.

Suicide is different. Employees who wouldn't think of holding themselves accountable for a co-workers' accidental automobile death, may torture themselves with guilt over not having done enough to prevent a suicidal death. On top of all the grief that people experience after a "conventional" death, many must walk a gauntlet of guilt, confusion and emotional turmoil that is in many ways unique those who have lost someone to suicide.

Managers may feel that they should have been in better touch with their subordinates, that there was something suspect in their management style (particularly if there has been a difficult relationship or recent disciplinary issues), or feel overly responsible for creating job stressors.

Given the social stigma associated with suicide, those left behind are often unable to cope with their loss and grief using normal support systems, and are "forced into a privatized and individualistic mode of grieving," making the healing process even more difficult. No one, no institution, or part of our society, is free from the stigma associated with suicide and mental illness.

Why Do People Take Their Life?

Although the answer to the question of why a specific person would choose to die by suicide is something that cannot really be answered. There are some explanations that may help to understand someone's action but in most cases, only the person who's no longer with us truly has all of the answers.

Even though there is clear scientific data that indicates irrefutably that a physical connection exists with most mental disorders, many people still stigmatize others because they hold on to the misguided beliefs that people with mental disorders are weak or just lack will power.

Suicide is a deeply personal act that is the responsibility of the person who took his/her own life. The person who died by suicide may or may not have shared their thoughts and feelings with others. Most suicidal people desperately want to live. They are often just unable to see alternatives to their problems.

The Loss of a Co-Worker

You may be surprised by the strength of your reactions; or on the other hand you may be concerned that you are having such minimal response. However, you are experiencing your grief, remember not to judge your reactions and try not to judge the way your colleagues are reacting. Everyone will respond differently at different times.

Grief is not limited to certain people; everyone has the right to grieve. There is no specific set of emotional or physical reactions that apply to everyone.



Common Reactions

With suicide, the natural mourning process is supercharged with emotions of shock, guilt and possibly anger. Sometimes suicide is not a surprise. Even then, though, suicide often touches off “unresolved grief,” a sense among suicide loss survivors that they did not do all they could to help the victim when he or she was alive. Suicide adds a dimension of “unfinished emotional business” to the relationship that has ended.

Confusion

Suicide is so sudden that there is confusion as to what has really happened. Confusion is greater when it may be unclear whether the suicide was intentional or not. Questions about what happened and how it happened remain, and survivors may struggle with reconciling the person they knew and the actions they took. Confusion is particularly great when the person had recently appeared to be feeling better or more hopeful.

Shame

One of the most prominent feelings is that of shame. There is such stigma around suicide in our society that suicide loss survivors may not feel comfortable or able to acknowledge their loved one took his/her own life. They may also worry that the suicide may imply to others that they were a horrible partner/family member/friend. This may manifest in pressure to keep the death a secret or to pretend as if it had never happened. This can cause serious emotional strain, particularly if there is conflict about keeping the secret.

Guilt

Suicide loss survivors may experience feelings of guilt for not being able to do something for their loved one to prevent their death. They may think, “If only I’d done X...”. They may feel a powerful sense of responsibility, that their death was somehow their fault. Some suicide loss survivors may also feel guilty if they feel any sense of relief, particularly if their relationship with the person who died was ambivalent or painful, or if there had been previous suicide attempts. Suicide loss survivors may fear being seen as insensitive or uncaring.

Anger

Suicide loss survivors often become angry with the person who died, wondering, “Why? Why did you do this to me?” Underlying this sense of anger may be feelings of rejection and inadequacy (e.g. “I wasn’t enough to live for.”) and guilt at being angry. There may well be anger at God or oneself. The only one who really knows why is no longer here to tell us.

Blame

It is not uncommon to search for blame in others, especially if suicide loss survivors are feeling their own sense of personal responsibility. Finding someone to blame also enables suicide loss survivors to direct anger toward the person who died (anger they may feel is inappropriate or wrong to have) to someone else. Blame helps survivors feel a sense of control, attempting to find answers to questions that may never be answered.

Trauma

It is not uncommon to have disturbing and graphic images from a loved one’s suicide play in one’s head. If the suicide loss survivor witnessed the suicide, the images may play over and over in his/her mind. If the survivor did not witness the suicide, his/her imagined fantasies of the event may be even more disturbing.

Disconnection

When we lose a loved one to disease or an accident, it is easier to retain happy memories of them. We know that, if they could choose, they would still be here with us. But it’s not as easy for the suicide loss survivor. Because our loved one seems to have made a choice that is devastating to us, we feel disconnected and “divorced” from their memory. We are in a state of conflict with them, and we may feel we are left to resolve that conflict alone.

How to Cope with Suicide Loss

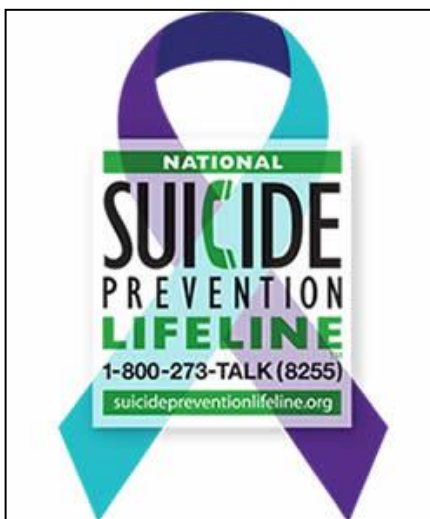
There is no “right way” to grieve your loss. Grief is intensely personal and individual. You may be experiencing a wide range of powerful emotions, no emotions at all or somewhere in between. The following guidelines may be helpful as you deal in your own unique way...

- Most people struggle with what to tell other people. Do what feels right for you. Many suicide loss survivors find it helpful simply to acknowledge their loved one died by suicide. The silence that may surround suicide, affects the conversation about how to address the issue. The conversation suicide loss survivors that can ease their pain and may prevent additional suicides.
- Keeping in contact with others is important, even if it is very difficult. Friends and family may feel that they don't know what to say or how to help. It may be important to share with them as much as you can about your thoughts and feelings. If you have a sense of what you need from them, ask for it. Joining a support group with other suicide loss survivors can be very helpful. Counseling is another option.
- Take the tasks of daily living at your own pace. You may feel unusually exhausted, nervous, or restless. Physical reactions to grief, like headaches and loss of appetite, are common.
- Expect setbacks. Grieving is a process. So is healing. Try to be kind to yourself if you feel like you're not “getting over it” or if you think you're not “dealing” well with your loss. If you're in It's also okay not to know what you need or not be able to articulate it to yourself or to others.
- [Avoid stigmatism terminology](#). We need to talk more about suicide and make sure we talk about it in a way that is helpful and healthy. The word ‘commit’ comes from a time when suicide was treated as a crime. As we learn more about suicide, our language has evolved. The more we can use language that accurately and sensitively describes suicide, the more we encourage a healthy and respectful way to talk about suicide.

Died by suicide, ended his or her life rather than committed suicide is an example. Completed suicide rather than was “successful at suicide” is another example.

Contagion

Having your own suicidal thoughts is common. This does not mean you will act on them. In the aftermath of a suicide some vulnerable individuals in the workplace or other areas in the organization may be at risk of responding to the suicide by attempting their own suicide. This is also known as a [contagion](#) effect. In other words, the death by suicide of a co-worker already vulnerable may increase their risk for copy-cat behavior. Maintain situational awareness and any signs that other may be showing that they are struggling.



[American Association of Suicidology](#)

[Alliance of Hope for Suicide Loss Survivors](#)

[Suicide: Finding Hope](#)

[Share the Load – NVFC](#)

[Military and Veteran Support](#)

[Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance](#)

[American Indian and Alaska Natives](#)